

STATUS PERCEPTIONS

by

C. Norman Alexander, Jr.

Stanford University

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## ABSTRACT

It is proposed that people perceive differently the status of persons or positions in any collectivity as a function of their own status positions. Specifically, the lower the actual or imagined or aspired to status of the perceiver the smaller will be the dispersion of his status judgments, primarily because he diminishes the status distance between persons or positions by raising the status of those at the lower end of the continuum. This was demonstrated with data on occupational prestige perceptions from a national sample and a group of high school senior males and with data on popularity judgments by members of a school class. The importance of these perspectival differences for theoretical conceptions of status-related behavior is emphasized, and the possibility of affecting aspirations by changing status cognitions is discussed.

## STATUS PERCEPTIONS\*

Ever since Marx, ideological theorists have insisted that one's position in the social structure profoundly influences his perspective on the system. The literature in sociology is full of studies showing that social class makes important differences in attitudes, values, and life-styles. But there is one area in which consensual perceptions across social strata constitute the overwhelming emphasis. Strangely enough, this research deals with the very perception of status itself--occupational prestige judgments. Davies (1952) searched futilely among prestige perception studies for differences in status perceptions by the social position of the perceiver, but he had to conclude that more than a quarter-century of research revealed only a "remarkable consensus".

The impression of remarkable consensus has been reinforced by the results reported in the two decades since Davies' review of the literature. Study after study stresses correlations of  $+0.98$  and better between the status judgments of different strata within and between most industrialized societies. But this impression--that social position does not influence status perceptions--is inconsistent with most societal theories. Furthermore, it conflicts with a vast amount of evidence in psychophysics and social psychology (Sherif and Hovland, 1961; Nelson, 1964) showing that a person's position (or anchor standard) on any judgmental scale influences his perception of stimuli along that dimension. And, finally, the illusion of remarkable consensus simply does not fit the data from many of the studies that foster it.

The problem of differential status perceptions is an important one, and it needs to be reclaimed as an area deserving sociological scrutiny. Aside from the theoretical relevance of the phenomena per se, there are many research

questions that presume knowledge of and require measurement of status perceptions. For instance: Status incongruity assumes perceived distinctions and discrepancies in several status-orders that affect a person's self-regard and others' treatments of him. Problems of distributive justice necessarily involve placement of self and socially compared others in status positions. And, of course, any concern with levels of aspiration and achievement orientation fundamentally implicate perceived status distinctions.

Since status is a critical variable that governs the rights and rules in terms of which interactors mutually orient themselves, differential assessments can make important differences in the flow of social interaction. The primary purpose of this paper is to establish that systematic perceptual differences do exist in status structures as a function of the perceiver's position; to suggest that these are general properties of all types of status systems; and to illustrate that these differential perceptions are associated with important phenomena of interest to social scientists. After reviewing the literature on status perceptions, new research evidence will be presented and its implications discussed.

#### Community and Occupational Prestige Studies

The pioneering and now-classic series of studies by W. Lloyd Warner (1949) remains the most comprehensive body of research in the area of community prestige. Unfortunately, Warner was so concerned to find the "true" number of classes and correctly place individuals in them that he tended to ignore annoying indications of differential perceptions. He was later criticized for this and, particularly, for selecting upper-middle class judges as informants (Kornhauser, 1953). But subsequent work was never really systematic enough or of sufficient scope to provide conclusive answers to the problems raised.

From the Warner series, however, there did emerge a particularly cogent statement of class-related differences in status perceptions. Davis, Gardner, and Gardner (1941) discussed variations by structural position in perceptions of the bases as well as the judgmental variations associated with status distinctions. They noted two tendencies: (1) Prestige distinctions decrease in fineness with increasing "social distance" between judge and adjudged; and (2) people tend to enhance their relative prestige in a system by utilizing many or few judgmental categories. The number of class groupings perceived increases with the status of the judge. "In general, too, individuals visualize class groups above them less clearly than those below them; they tend to minimize the social differentiation between themselves and those above...In view of this situation it is not surprising that individuals in the two upper strata make the finest gradations in the stratification of the whole society and that class distinctions are made with decreasing precision as social position becomes lower." (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, 1941, p. 72).

Lewis (1964) noted that the "social distance" and "ego-enhancement" generalizations are somewhat inconsistent in their implications, and he suggested an appropriate reformulation. People should be able to make the finest distinctions in those adjacent areas of the social structure that are most familiar and relevant to them, but doing so above one's own position tends to lower self-evaluation. Thus, it seems most likely that prestige distinctions will be made as social distance decreases and as the ego-enhancement implied by the distinction increases. The proposition has never been adequately tested, but it seems consistent with observations from community prestige data.

One would expect to find such propositions systematically explored with the data from occupational prestige studies, especially since these studies have

employed more adequate sampling and more sophisticated methodological techniques. However, investigators in this area have been more impressed by the correlational consensus among respondents than interested in exploring differential perceptions of prestige. In an extensive analysis of the 1950 NORC data, Reiss briefly comments: "The most obvious difference in the ratings of occupations by economic level, both in terms of rank and prestige-increment criteria, is the tendency for poor people to rate almost all occupations... higher than do the prosperous, with the middle class generally intermediate in position" (Reiss, 1961, p. 175). However, he wonders if this difference might not be due to response-category labels (the poor regard any steady job as "good") and makes little of it. However, something should be made of it, because it produces a pattern of status judgments that is similar to that in community prestige studies, where respondents chose their own categories for judgment.

In this paper I will argue that there is a consistent patterning of differential prestige perceptions by the position of the perceiver and that it is the same in any structure. A status structure is defined as a consensual ordering of persons or positions along a similarly-valued dimension by knowledgeable members of a collectivity. Thus, for there to be a status structure, rank-order consensus must exist about the relative placements of persons or positions along an evaluative dimension that is similarly valued (that is, placement implies evaluation and one end of the continuum--e.g., "high" status--is more positively valued than the other). Members of the collectivity are considered competent judges if they know (1) the meaning of the dimension in terms of which they must judge and (2) are familiar enough with the objects

of judgment to know how to place them. The definition is appropriately general enough to include any collectivity (from a small group to a national society) in which individuals, positions, or status-attributes are similarly ranked in terms of a consensually valued dimension.

First, I want to provide support for the basic proposition that the dispersion of status judgments increases as the status of the judge increases in different types of structures with different types of populations. I also want to show that this proposition is true, not only for actual status of the judge, but also with regard to his anticipated, imagined, or aspired to status in the system. The implications of this lawful relation between perceiver's position and the patterning of his prestige perceptions will then be discussed briefly. We will consider occupational prestige judgements of a national sample, popularity judgments among students in a high school, and the prestige perceptions and educational aspirations of high school senior males.

#### I. Occupational Prestige: The NORC Data

The original NORC data from 1950 are presented by Reiss (1961, pp. 198-217; 276-295) in such a way that it is possible to reconstruct the data in appropriate form. However, we run into a problem over our "knowledgeable respondent" criteria of judgment, because there are substantial numbers of "don't know" responses in the study. The evidence indicates that knowledge about occupations is differentially distributed within the status structure such that it decreases as (1) the status of the position being rated increases and (2) the status of the rater decreases. Furthermore, the NORC study contained a disproportionate number of high status occupations that are fairly technical, if not quite esoteric. Data from the study show two things: First the absence of

accurate knowledge about an occupation does not dissuade people from rating it (Reiss, 1961, p. 17). Although only 49.6 per cent of respondents rated the occupation of nuclear physicist, a later question revealed that 61.3 per cent of those rating it did not know what it was (they had "no idea", "vague" or "wrong" responses about what a nuclear physicist did). Second, knowledge affects ratings. Those who were correct in knowing what a nuclear physicist did (N=78) rated the position as an "excellent" one in 71.8 per cent of the cases, whereas only 31.3 per cent of those who had no idea what he did (N=400) gave excellent ratings.

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Table I About Here

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Although we cannot determine which respondents were relatively ignorant from the summary data presented by Reiss, we can eliminate occupations that were relatively unknown. Arbitrarily, 27 of the 90 occupations were removed, because less than 95 per cent of the respondents claimed to know enough about them to rate them. The per cent of respondents at each status level who rated these occupations as "excellent" or "good" is presented in Table 1, with the occupations being divided into equal thirds according to their overall prestige scores. The data show substantial differences by rater-status in the prestige scores assigned the lower two-thirds of the hierarchy, but very little differences in ratings of the top third. It is obvious from the table that the dispersion of judgmental responses decreases as the status of the judge decreases: lower status respondents are less inclined to use the "poor" category and more frequently use the positive ratings. It is possible, however,



that the category labels did have something to do with these results; and it is also possible that these data are peculiar to occupational prestige ratings or to large social collectivities. Thus, to explore the generality of the phenomena, we turn to consideration of a very different type of "prestige": popularity among one's high school classmates.

## II. High School Popularity Ratings

To get a better picture of differential status perceptions as a function of the perceiver's position and to establish the generality of the phenomena across a range of status structures, it seemed advantageous to move away from the areas of occupational or community prestige. To minimize methodological problems "popularity"-status judgments in a high school class were selected for investigation. This eliminated entirely the difficulties of sampling--especially acute in selecting occupations to be judged--by permitting inclusion of the entire universe of judges and judgmental objects. Knowledge could be determined rather directly. Furthermore, an informal collectivity has no historically established barriers to communication and information nor any specialization of task-functions, associational patterns, and structurally determined visibility channels. Finally, a high school class is sufficiently different from community or national occupational prestige structures that claims of generality are more plausible.

A school in a middle-income suburb was selected on the basis of homogeneity in socio-economic composition, moderate class size, and limited geographical dispersion of students. The 161 students whom the school classified as seniors were asked to judge the popularity of the same-sex others in their class. Popularity was judged on a 9-point, unlabelled continuum, ranging from LOW to

HIGH. Listings were mimeographed in alphabetical order, with the pages randomly ordered for presentation. The poles of the judgmental continuum were not alternated, since constant response bias was unimportant compared to a risk of increased response error.

To insure that respondents were knowledgeable and the judgmental universe "known", judgments by and about students were removed if they did not judge or were not judged by 80 per cent of their classmates. A person was judged unless the respondent "never heard of him" or knew "nothing about him at all". Fourteen students were eliminated, seven of whom had been in the school less than two years. The popularity ranking for each sex was determined on the basis of responses by the 147 seniors remaining. They were divided into approximately equal thirds (25-24-25 for males, 24-25-24 for females). All data were initially analyzed separately by sex (Alexander, 1965, pp. 161-187); but they are averaged here, since it simplifies presentation and does not change the conclusions.

Since consensual rank-ordering is required in order that a status structure exist, we computed correlation coefficients between each individual's popularity judgments and the consensually defined mean values on popularity for each of the persons rated. Even though rank-order agreement is all that is required, it was more convenient and interesting to compute the Pearsonian coefficients. By equal-thirds of the popularity order for judges, the average coefficients were between +.70 and +.79, with a very slight tendency for higher status respondents to be more "accurate". It might be more theoretically appropriate to discard cases who did not perceive the popularity ordering in accord with their peers; but this was not done, since everyone had an

accuracy correlation above +.30 and any cut-off point would have been arbitrary. Obtaining average Pearsonian correlations above .70 indicates adequate consensus, especially since these are undoubtedly lower than rank-order coefficients would be.

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Table 2 About Here

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Table 2 presents the mean popularity judgments of those in each popularity third about those at each third, and the data show the expected pattern. As with occupational judgments, respondents do not differ much in their ratings of those at the upper end of the prestige-popularity continuum, but they progressively differ as the status of the judgmental object decreases. The dispersion of popularity judgments decreases as the popularity of the judge decreases. Once again, this is due to the fact that lower status judges give higher ratings to objects of judgment as the positions of those objects decrease in status.

Since we asked our respondents to rate themselves on the popularity dimensions along with their ratings of classmates, we can examine the prediction that judgmental dispersions are associated with anticipated, imagined, or aspired to status positions. The standard deviation of popularity judgments was computed for each respondent; and, by sex at each of the three status levels they were divided at the median. Mean self-placements were then computed. Table 3 presents the mean self-placement judgments of respondents by actual popularity ranking and high or low standard deviation of popularity judgments. The table shows that objective and self-perceived popularity standings are

associated with judgmental dispersions in the same way: dispersions increase with actual and imagined popularity ratings. This has interesting implications, which we will consider after presenting some data gathered on high school senior males' prestige perceptions and educational aspirations.

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Table 3 About Here

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### III. Male Seniors' Occupational Perceptions and Educational Aspirations

In an upper status suburban area we surveyed high school senior males about their college plans and perceptions of occupational prestige. They rated the prestige of 50 occupations (using the NORC list as a core and trying to balance the distribution of occupational statuses to approximate that in the population) on an unlabelled, 9-point continuum. Based on their responses to a question about father's occupation we classified them as either white collar or blue collar. We eliminated those who did not give adequate responses to the prestige-judgment question (failed to discriminate among occupations, didn't answer, or answered in obviously idiosyncratic ways) and those who, in a separate question about knowledge of 15 jobs, indicated they knew little or nothing about most.

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Table 4 About Here

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Table 4 reports the mean occupational prestige judgments by status of judge and judged and the percentage of respondents at each status level whose standard deviation of prestige judgments was above the sample mean. The mean judgments show the expected pattern, and the standard deviations of white collar students are significantly higher than those of blue collar respondents. Turning now to their aspirations following graduation from high school, we found that almost all had some plans for further education, so we classified them as "high aspirers" if they planned to attend a 4-year college or University and "low aspirers" if they planned anything else.

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Table 5 About Here

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Table 5 presents the per cent who have high aspirations--by status level and the standard deviation of their occupational prestige judgments. Just as with the popularity judgments shown in Table 3, actual status has the most impact on aspired to status, but there is also an association between prestige-judgment dispersion and aspirations. For those with high status, prestige dispersion has a significant relationship with educational aspirations; and for those with low status, the association almost reaches a statistically significant level. The same trends can be seen in data relevant to the occupational aspirations of these respondents; however, we asked for those responses in an open-ended question, and almost one-third of the sample either failed to answer or gave such vague responses that they could not be coded.

### Conclusions

It is clear that substantial and systematic differences exist in the perception of status as a function of the perceiver's status in the system--as it is objectively defined to be and as he sees it or anticipates it to be. On either basis, the higher the status of the judge, the greater his judgmental dispersion, due largely to the fact that he judges lower status persons or positions as lower on the scale. This has been shown with occupational prestige judgments from a national sample in 1950 and an upper-middle class suburban sample of high school seniors in the late 1960s, as well as with the popularity judgments of members of a high school class. The same pattern has also been evident in earlier studies of community prestige. We are thus led to propose that it is a general characteristic of the perception of status (as placement along a consensually evaluative dimension) in any collectivity. The independent influence of self-perceived or aspired to status is an interesting and important finding that has rarely been considered, and remains inadequately explored (Blau, 1957).

Differential status perceptions may prove important in such areas as the shaping of occupational and educational aspirations. Weinstein (1957-58) found that high status youngsters lumped everyone from skilled craftsmen to private household workers in the same low job category, while low status children classified skilled craftsmen with professionals in their top category. If objects are similarly classified, they are usually responded to in a similar manner. Thus, it may be that the skilled crafts seemed equivalent to domestic service in the eyes of upper status respondents, while lower status students might have regarded a skilled craftsman position as equivalent to a

professional position in difficulty of attainment. Furthermore, if lower status persons systematically diminish the perceived prestige differences among all occupations, they may not be affected much by the "reward value" of prestige as an influence on occupational choices.

If there is a lawful relationship between prestige perceptions and aspirations, this would provide us with an easily manipulable way of changing aspirations. Most research on the determinants and antecedents of aspirations has focused on variables that are impossible or extremely difficult to manipulate--for example, familial factors, innate ability, underlying motivational and value structures, and so forth. It is decidedly frustrating to attend only to influential variables that cannot be controlled or modified; but the perceptual-pattern variable that has been emphasized here is cognitive and depends largely on the availability of information. Those who advise and counsel could readily manipulate the informational bases for prestige perceptions and, by that process, perhaps affect aspirations of students.

If this line of reasoning is systematically explored, we may find that people are responding to their perceptions of different status worlds rather than responding differently (for motivational reasons) to similar perceptions of consensually defined status structures. Apart from learning more about the cognitive impact of social structures on the persons who participate in them from different positions, further study will undoubtedly lead us to clarify and refine theoretical formulations that currently base their hypotheses on the assumption that status-objects have similarly defined values through the structure. Since this assumption of "consensual definition" pervades sociological thought, the recognition of perspectival differences by social position and the assessment of their effects should be a critical problem for the study of status-related social phenomena.

#### FOOTNOTE TO TITLE

I want to offer special thanks to Roy Childs for his assistance in analyzing the data. This is a revised and extended version of a paper read at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Washington D.C., August 1970. Data gathering and analysis for portions of the research were supported by a Graduate Fellowship Award from the National Science Foundation, the Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching, and a grant from the National Science Foundation, "The Influence of Occupational Prestige Perceptions on Adolescents' Aspirations," (GS-2095, C. Norman Alexander, Jr., Principal Investigator).



Table 1

PERCENT OF EXCELLENT-GOOD RATINGS OF "KNOWN"

OCCUPATIONS BY STATUS OF JUDGE AND OCCUPATION JUDGED

<u>Status of Judge</u>	<u>Status of Occupation Judged</u>			
	<u>High</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>N</u>
Above Average	82.6	33.6	00.6	514
Average	84.6	39.2	08.6	1,531
Below Average	85.4	50.6	17.4	856

Table 2

## MEAN POPULARITY JUDGMENTS--BY POPULARITY OF JUDGE AND JUDGED

<u>Popularity of Judge</u>	<u>Popularity of Judged</u>			<u>(N)</u>
	<u>High</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Low</u>	
High	6.7	4.7	3.0	(49)
Medium	6.7	4.9	3.3	(49)
Low	6.8	5.3	3.8	(49)

Table 3

MEAN SELF-PLACEMENT RATINGS--BY JUDGE'S POPULARITY AND  
STANDARD DEVIATION OF POPULARITY JUDGMENTS

<u>Popularity of Judge</u>	<u>Standard Deviation of Popularity Judgments</u>	
	<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>
High	7.1(23)	6.2(24)
Medium	5.6(23)	5.2(23)
Low	5.1(24)	4.7(25)

Table 4

MEAN OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE JUDGMENTS--AND PERCENT OF JUDGES ABOVE  
MEAN STANDARD DEVIATION--BY STATUS OF JUDGE AND OCCUPATIONS JUDGED

<u>Status of Judge</u>	<u>Status of Judged Occupations</u>		<u>Per Cent Above Mean Standard Deviation in Judgments*</u>
	<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>	
High	6.7	4.3	61.1%(422)
Low	6.5	4.7	50.6%(166)

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\* Differences by status level are significant beyond .05 level by  
chi square test with 1 d.f.

Table 5

PER CENT WITH HIGH EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS--BY

JUDGE'S STATUS AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF PRESTIGE JUDGMENTS

<u>Status of Judge</u>	<u>Standard Deviation of Prestige Judgments</u>		<u>Chi Square Test</u>
	<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>	
High	59.7% (258)	47.0% (164)	P $\angle$ .01
Low	38.1 (84)	26.8 (82)	P = .08

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